

# Connecting Caring and Action through Responsive Teaching

## How One Team Accomplished Success in a Struggling Middle School

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In *Turning Points 2000*, Jackson and Davis noted that “changes in middle grades practices have least often occurred where they are needed most: in high-poverty urban and rural communities where unacceptably poor student achievement is rampant” (2000, 5). Even so, in many struggling schools, some teams have been very successful. Their classrooms have been safe havens for students; lessons have been energizing; learning has mattered. This article reports a case study that described how one middle school team achieved success in a struggling school.

### Background

Studies of successful teachers have clearly documented the importance of relationships between teachers and students, especially in settings where many students have not previously performed well academically. Noddings summarized many of these studies in her synthesis of research on “caring” in schools. Emphasizing that caring and action are intertwined, she concluded that the main goal of schooling should be “to promote the growth of students as healthy, competent, moral people” (1992, 10).

In the decade following Noddings’ synthesis, a number of investigations explored specific aspects of teachers’ attempts to connect caring and action. Noting that most studies of Noddings’ “ethic of caring” have been narrative in nature, Shann (1999) developed a questionnaire to analyze ways that students’ perceptions of caring behaviors of their teachers related to their academic performance and behavior in schools. Responses from 1,508 students from four urban middle schools showed that one major factor, “teacher commitment to students,” accounted for much of the difference among

the four schools. The schools with the highest levels of teacher caring had the highest levels of academic achievement and prosocial behaviors such as respect and helpfulness among students. Corbett and Wilson conducted interviews with more than two hundred students from five of the most impoverished middle schools in a large city over a two-year period. Students consistently emphasized three “highly prized traits” of some of their teachers: being eager to help students individually but without playing favorites, being strict but nice and respectful, and taking the time to explain work clearly without becoming tediously repetitive (1998, 266).

These studies have enriched and extended the descriptions of successful teachers from earlier investigations. Ladson-Billings (1994) found that successful teachers in urban settings treat all students as competent, provide them with academic challenges and encourage them to achieve. Benard (1996) found that the conditions that fostered resiliency among students from poverty included support that links beliefs and actions, positive and high expectations, and a sense of community. Nieto’s studies showed that the most important characteristics of successful schools were an enriched and demanding curriculum, respect for students’ languages and cultures, high expectations for all students, and encouragement of parental involvement (2000, 45). Willis (2000) found that students in culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms benefited from a variety of instructional strategies and cooperative approaches to motivation. Opportunities for building on students’ prior knowledge and then providing appropriate “scaffolding” were especially important.

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Langer identified a set of "beating the odds" teaching practices that characterized classrooms where students consistently performed well: an integrated approach to skills instruction, explicit connections between lessons and real-world experiences, explicit strategies instruction, and collaboration (2001, 857). Other case studies conducted with successful middle-level teachers showed how they created these caring conditions in their classrooms (Bowers 2000; Strahan et al. 2001). Teachers in these case studies demonstrated warm, supportive relationships by showing a deep knowledge of individual students, developing assignments that linked inquiry and collaboration, and involving students in classroom decisions on a continuous basis.

These analyses depicted some of the ways that successful teachers connected caring and action through specific instructional practices. Based on these studies, we initiated an exploratory investigation in 2001 to examine ways that one particular team in an urban middle school attempted to create stronger learning connections with students. The resulting case study (Strahan and Layell 2003) documented ways that teachers on the STAR (Strive to Attain Respect) team were able to create a climate of accomplishment at Washington Middle School. During the 2001–02 school year, students on this team demonstrated patterns of growth in achievement that met or exceeded expectations in a year when the average growth for the entire school was minimal. More important, team members nurtured a sense of community that promoted respect and responsibility.

In this article, we reexamined the results of that study to delineate more clearly some of the ways that the teachers on the STAR team created environments for learning. We found that these teachers put into practice many of the essential dynamics described by Bransford, Brown, and Cocking (2000) in their synthesis of research on learning and teaching commissioned by the National Research Council. These researchers identified four connected dimensions that characterized expertise in teaching, noting that successful classrooms integrate learner-centered, assessment-centered, and knowledge-centered environments in creating communities for learning. In their analysis, they emphasized the extent to which accomplished teachers respond to the needs of their students and the nature of their subject matter, concluding that "expert teachers know the kinds of difficulties that students are likely to face, and they know how to tap into their students' existing knowledge in order to make new information meaningful plus assess their students' progress" (2000, 49).

Based on this emphasis, we have used the phrase "responsive teaching" to encapsulate the major findings from previous research that guided our original study. In table 1, we have summarized the highlights from these earlier studies conducted with teachers who

have been successful in settings where students have not previously performed well academically. These highlights provided us with a working synthesis of the instructional practices successful teachers employ to connect caring and action by responding to the developmental needs of their students and the nature of their subject matter.

In this article, we show how teachers on the STAR team created these four essential learning environments and enacted many of these practices in their two classrooms.

## Method

During the 2001–02 school year, Washington Middle School served 645 students in grades six, seven, and eight. Eighty percent of the students qualified for free or reduced price lunch, a figure that grew by 13 percent during the year of the study. Statewide assessments for the previous year showed that 48.5 percent of the students were proficient in reading and math, far below the average for the district (72.6 percent) and state (74.6 percent). With a faculty of forty-six teachers, the rate of turnover was high, averaging twelve to fifteen teachers new to the building during each of the preceding three years. During the school year, the first author worked with the STAR team, a two-teacher team in the seventh grade, to study ways they encouraged their thirty-six students to be successful in this setting. One of the student teachers assigned to the team agreed to serve as "researcher in residence" and became the second author.

Researchers conducted a series of interviews with teachers, meeting with them formally at least twice a month and conducting twelve formal lesson observations over the year. Researchers collected samples of student work and met to analyze students' understanding of strategies and concepts. We began by reviewing letters students wrote at the end of the year and identifying the major ideas they expressed about their success. We found that they emphasized two major themes: support and structure. Their comments attributed their accomplishments to the caring relationships they had with teachers and to the strategies they learned. We then reviewed lesson observations for insights about these dynamics and explored these insights in additional interviews with the teachers.

In reanalyzing the data from that study for this article, we performed more powerful statistical analyses to see if gains on the STAR team were significantly stronger than those in the rest of the school. We also examined our earlier results as they related to learning environments, using the framework developed by Bransford, Brown, and Cocking (2000) in their synthesis of research on learning and teaching commissioned by the National Research Council. To verify this analysis, we conducted follow-up interviews with the two teachers (Ashely and Darlene) in January 2003. In reporting our results, we selected

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excerpts from observations and quotations from participants as illustrations. Citations in this article note the participant responsible for the quote or artifact and the date by the use of the following symbols: S=student, A=Ashely, D=Darlene, M=Michelle, T=Tonya and O=observer. For example, the citation for the first quotation (D5/02) signifies a quotation from Darlene in May of 2002.

Interviews and observations documented four principal ways that the STAR team “beat the odds” in promoting academic achievement:

1. Teachers created a classroom learning community through shared responsibility, team building, and positive discipline.
2. Teachers created a learner-centered environment,

that featured warm, supportive relationships with students.

3. Teachers centered assessment on students' learning strengths as well as areas of need.

4. Teachers created a knowledge-centered environment by connecting inquiry, collaboration, and real-world experiences.

### *Learning Community*

During the first two weeks of school, the STAR team focused on teaching procedures and building community. They posted and reviewed expectations, emphasized academic goal setting, and established a sense of team identity. They implemented a token economy that provided rewards for good behavior and academic accomplishment. Although the token economy provided a set of procedures for monitoring behavior, teachers insisted that the most important factor in creating a supportive climate was understanding their students and establishing caring relationships with them. When students misbehaved, teachers approached students individually. Researchers observed a number of what the teachers called "heart-to-heart" conversations (with individuals) or "group therapy" sessions (with small groups) in which they asked students to retrace their behaviors and examine the choices they made. Darlene provided an explanation:

When students disagreed, we listened to them, we didn't agree necessarily. By Christmas they knew they could speak their mind and not be criticized for what they were saying. But they knew that we were going to speak our mind too. Sometimes we would give, sometimes they would give, sometimes we would say, "Okay here are the rules and these are what we have to follow." (D5/02)

As the year progressed, students began to demonstrate shared responsibility by reminding each other of the team's expectations and showing students new to the team "how we do things on our team." As Michelle noted:

We try hard to reinforce our procedures every day. With this classroom community in place, students set expectations for one another as well. Often, students reprimand one another for poor behavior, lack of effort, or for causing disruptions. When students discipline themselves, we can focus more on the matters of the classroom that make a difference in the academic performance of our students. (M5/02)

### *Learner-centered Environment*

These dynamics were fueled by the ways the teachers created warm, supportive relationships with students. In their reflective comments, teachers noted that their attempts to get to know their students better enabled them to create more engaging lessons. Ashely described how she saw this connection:

I feel it is very important to learn about the students and their likes and dislikes. What are their interests? What kind of activities do they like? Do they like to play basketball? Do they like to watch movies? Once you get to know the kids on a personal level you have a much better way of getting them to learn academically. If you don't get to know them on a personal level they don't really trust you enough to give them the information that they need in order to be successful. So if you get to know them personally they begin to feel better around you. They can trust you and they can trust that you are leading them on the right road in their education. (A1/03)

A comment from one of the students in a reflective letter written at the end of the year illustrated students' perceptions of this climate:

My teachers taught me how to be more responsible and to be confident in myself. Before I came to this team I wasn't responsible or respectful. I would talk back and I used to be a mess. But now they have helped me and they give us something that every student needs—love. (S5/02)

### *Assessment of Learning Strengths and Areas of Need*

Two or three times each month, students were assigned projects and given options as to which project they would complete. Examples of these projects included student autobiographies, science fair projects, poetry notebooks, and Internet research reports. Teachers constructed rubrics for these projects that promoted deep levels of understanding and personalization.

These "big projects" were accompanied by weekly opportunities for question and answer sessions in which teachers encouraged students to raise questions and engage classmates in dialogue. Among the topics discussed across the year were divorce, prison, money, relationships, families, racial tensions, and pregnancy. Many of these sessions featured "what would you do?" scenarios. Analyzing decisions became a major theme in literature and current events. When "thinking through" decisions that others made, students were encouraged to examine their own decisions, often reflecting on their decisions regarding team behavior.

In interviews, teachers emphasized the importance of these "teachable moments." One teacher noted, "Our students often find themselves making adult decisions in the midst of adult situations. We try to help them deal with the real world" (T5/02). By linking these real world issues with academic tasks, teachers promoted a problem-solving stance that characterized much of the instructional flow of their lessons. A student commented in his letter:

Ever since I have been on this team I have learned a lot. I have been taught to respect others, to succeed in my life, and to do better. My teachers are attitude breakers. They have taught me new ways to learn in my subjects and in other places. (S5/02)

*Knowledge-centered Environment*

Early in the year, STAR teachers structured their lessons around specific strategies such as Cornell note taking, think-and-search reading comprehension procedures, and the SOLVE method for solving word problems in math (Study the problem, Organize the facts, Line up a plan, Verify the plan with action, Examine the solution). They demonstrated these strategies, guided students in practicing them, and gave them many opportunities to practice them independently. As the year progressed and they introduced new concepts, they cycled back to these strategies repeatedly. Toward the end of the year, they incorporated these strategies into test preparation activities.

Once or twice a week, the teachers would conduct discussion sessions in which they would ask individual students to teach strategy lessons, encouraging them to show how they solved problems. Another student commented in her end-of-the year letter:

My teachers have helped me organize my binder and keep up with all of my schoolwork. They are very kind teachers who care for all of their students. . . . They have taught me new ways to do things. They have brought me from C's, D's, and F's to A's, and B's. (S5/02)

Ashely highlighted the way she and Tonya emphasized the "SMART" strategy for reading comprehension and test taking:

First you show students how to "skim" the test passage and the questions to see what the passage is about and what the questions want you to know. Then, you "mark" the questions by circling key words and checking the questions you can answer by looking back at the passage. Then, we show them how to "answer" all of the questions that are right there by "reading" for the facts. Finally, they can "think and search" for answers for the rest of the questions. These steps spell "SMART" and it is a good way to show students how to use all the time they have and make good guesses on their tests. (A1/03)

Lesson observations illustrated some of the other ways that teachers operationalized strategy instruction. For example, the following excerpt from a poetry lesson shows how the teacher incorporated a compare/contrast strategy using a Venn diagram.

The plan for today's lesson stated that students will compare and contrast their views of songs and poems. Ms. S. distributed 4 X 6 cards and asked students to list two ways that songs are like poems and two ways they are different. She then guided students in creating a Venn diagram comparing and contrasting songs and poems. Among the similarities listed were that "both used interesting words" and "both tried to create feelings." Differences included "songs have music with them" and "poems are written down." The teacher then distributed lyrics to Lauryn Hill's "Do You Like the Way" and asked students to listen carefully to the song and follow along with the lyrics and then write about what the song means to them, stating both a "feeling" and a "message" and giving examples of figurative language. To conclude the lesson the teacher asked students to review their diagram comparing and contrasting songs and poems. Most agreed that there were more similarities than differences. (O2/02)

Lessons like this one encouraged students to think deeply by applying learning strategies to familiar text and making real-world connections.

## Results

Analysis of achievement test data indicated that students on the STAR team made more progress in reading and math than did the rest of the students at the school. As shown in table 2, the average gain in score for STAR students on state mandated achievement tests from 2001 to 2002 was 5.1 points in reading and 5.1 points in math. For the entire school, the average gains were 2.8 points in reading and 2.7 points in math. Percentage gains for students on the STAR team of 3.3 percent in reading and 2.0 percent in math approached the state averages and exceeded the schoolwide aver-

ages of 1.8 percent in reading and 1.1 percent in math, which did not meet expectations for growth.

To assess the significance of these differences, we performed two statistical analyses. First we conducted an analysis of variance to determine if the reading and math scores of the students on the STAR team were significantly different from those of the rest of the school when they were assigned to the team in 2001. As indicated in table 3, between-groups comparisons in both math and reading showed that scores of students on the STAR team were not significantly different from those of their fellow students when the 2001–02 school year began.

To assess differences at the end of the year, we performed an analysis of covariance using the 2001 scores in reading and math as the covariates. As indicated in tables 4 and 5, scores from the end of the year showed significant differences in math and reading.

This analysis suggested that students on the STAR team made significantly more progress on state tests in math and reading than did their schoolmates.

### Conclusion

While exploratory in nature, this study documented ways that teachers on the STAR team created a climate of accomplishment in a struggling middle

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school. Students demonstrated patterns of growth in achievement that met or exceeded expectations in a year when the average growth for the entire school was minimal. More important, team members nurtured a sense of community that promoted respect and responsibility. They accomplished these successes by creating a classroom learning community that featured shared responsibility, team building, and positive discipline; by establishing a learner-centered environment that featured warm, supportive relationships with students; by centering assessment on students learning strengths as well as areas of need; and by creating a knowledge-centered environment that connected inquiry, collaboration, and real-world experiences. In doing so, teachers on the STAR team demonstrated many of the responsive teaching practices identified in previous studies (Ladson-Billings 1994; Benard 1996; Corbett and Wilson 1998; Shann 1999; Bowers 2000; Nieto 2000; Willis 2000; Langer 2001; Strahan et al. 2001).

One of the most important contributions of this case study may be that it gives researchers a specific glimpse of the nature of teacher expertise in a challenging setting. Recent calls for reform emphasize teacher quality primarily in terms of content area expertise and pedagogical understanding. Teachers on the STAR team clearly demonstrated knowledge of their subject matter and the use of effective methodology. Their caring relationships with students and with each other may have been equally important to their success, however. Without much support from their colleagues on other teams, Darlene, Ashely, Michelle, and Tonya relied on each other for ideas and encouragement. They worked as a team to solve problems collaboratively and creatively. They created a safe haven for their students and for each other. These affective dimensions of expertise merit further examination if middle level educators are

to extend their efforts to meet the *Turning Points 2000* challenge to provide changes in middle grades practices where they are needed most.

*Key words:* middle school, STAR team, learning environments

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